

Michigan Regional Skills Alliances[®]

Report on Site Visits Made to the 2006 Grantees

October, 2007

Re-cap of Site Visit Reports with Original Grantees and Partners

The original 12 MiRSA grantees and partners were interviewed between late December 2006 and mid-February 2007. The purpose was primarily to see how the MiRSA initiative was working from the grantees' point of view, look for ways the state can better support existing MiRSAs, and listen to any suggestions for future grantees. The site visit reports identified several factors that particularly influence successful outcomes for the MiRSAs.

- a. Recognized need for a MiRSA and committed employers ready to take action
- b. Conveners who bring value by adding expertise and a personal network that compliments that of the employers.
- c. Acquisition of data to support the need(s)
- d. Getting the "right people" to the table; effective community partners
- e. Strategic planning and goal setting
- f. Implementation
- g. Review of results and revisiting the strategic plan
- h. Successful MiRSAs are focused and tend to set and achieve specific goals.

Issues and concerns expressed during the original site visits are as follows:

- a. Funding was limited to one program year only
- b. Response time for the Request For Proposal (RFP) was too short
- c. Mature MiRSAs should be allowed to re-structure geographically or refine their industry focus based on goal accomplishment and supportive data without ramifications to funding
- d. Measure success by each individual MiRSA's accomplished goals rather than artificially applying existing workforce program requirements. In the original document, "Michigan Regional Skills Alliances: A Vision for 2010," released in May 2005, there were several other expected outcomes.
- e. Sustainability
- f. Marketing the MiRSA concept, as well as industry specific marketing
- g. Duplication of efforts by MiRSAs of the same industry in different regions
- h. Time demands to participate in a plethora of regional initiatives

Technical Assistance needs that were revealed during the site visits included:

- a. Strategic Planning Assistance
- b. Access to Information (statewide)
- c. Access to Information (between MiRSAs)
- d. MiRSA Marketing (statewide)
- e. Relationship Building/Facilitation

Summer 2007 Site Visit Report

Background:

During the summer of 2007, DLEG Michigan Regional Skills Alliances staff met with conveners, partners and employers participating in collaborations that received grant funds in 2006. The staff person assigned to the MiRSA was the primary interviewer with an additional staff person accompanying each of the visits.

The purpose was primarily to see how the MiRSA initiative was working from the grantees' point of view, look for ways the State can better support existing MiRSAs, and collect any suggestions useful for future grantees. Eight (8) Regional Skills Alliances participated in these conversations. These visits afforded an opportunity to contrast the information collected from the site visits with the initial grantees to the information obtained from the recently awarded MiRSAs.

There were several similarities of note that arose from this information gathering. These are detailed in the following narrative. Many of the insights offer immediate opportunity for the State to improve the responsiveness of this initiative. A number of MiRSAs cited these opportunities for collaboration as timely and critical to addressing workforce development issues.

General Comments on the Visits:

Most conveners, employers, and partners welcomed the site visits as a chance to gain the ear of the State and exchange concerns and information in anticipation of overall improvements in the delivery of the initiative. The interview team approached each meeting with a standard list of potential questions that were used as a guide.

After reviewing the initial site visit reports, it is apparent that factors contributing to a successfully operating MiRSA continue to hold true. Also, the areas of issues and technical assistance desired mirrors many of the same areas identified following the site visits with the original MiRSAs.

MiRSA Development

Initial development of a MiRSA should involve the identification of galvanizing issues and pulling together the employer champions. With a convener entity devoted to facilitating resource and asset brokering, the MiRSA is ready to hit the ground running and realize early successes. Defined goals allow the MiRSAs to focus on specific strategies. Employers tend to become more engaged when plans are clear and accomplishments apparent. This also enhances enlistment of other employer and community partners. Sustaining the organization becomes less of an issue with the growing stability and commitment of the partnerships.

Funding needs during the early planning stages tend to be lighter than the implementation and stabilizing stages. The visits revealed a concern to revise the funding structure to reflect the MiRSA development patterns.

Observations of Successful Practices/Methods

When the community is aware of the successes of the MiRSA, the MiRSA is able to leverage that knowledge. Employers interested in sharing in the successes become engaged in the goal setting and planning. Once aligned with the aims of the MiRSA, employer and community partners perceive the importance of sustaining the endeavor.

- Assuring the “right people” at the table, MiRSAs experienced early success with Human Resource Officers, CEOs, education superintendents, and university leadership that were directly engaged.
- A keen understanding of community resources and assets uses those resources and funding effectively and efficiently. Some MiRSAs have elected to hire expertise to facilitate strategic planning assuring a quick turn-around from planning to implementation.
- MiRSAs report developing training offerings that enjoy recognition and credibility throughout the community.
- Some successful training incorporates opportunities to intern and earn while learning making the training more accessible to low-income workers.
- Other MiRSAs built collaborations between education and industry creating on-site work experiences for teachers.
- Regular communication with members and the community via newsletters, e-newsletters, media articles, and partnering with local TV community programming reaps recognition by potential students, workers, and parents.

Expressed Issues:

Funding

MiRSA Comments: Like the mature MiRSAs, the more recently funded MiRSAs indicated that the one-year grant period was too short. Industry groups already established to address workforce issues prior to seeking MiRSA funding are, generally, able to advance directly to the strategic planning and implementation stages. Such groups are more able to utilize full funding within a one-year period. Industry groups recently formed would benefit from funding to sustain them through early development stages with additional funding available for later in-depth strategic planning and project implementation.

(BWP Note: Beginning with Program Year 2007, MiRSAs are allowed to utilize funds for two years.)

BWP Recommendation: Implement a formal planning grant application.

RFP Application

MiRSA Comments: Generally, only industry groups already established to address workforce issues have been adequately prepared to respond within the past RFP application deadlines. Groups that have identified a need but do not have significant employer commitment, supportive data collected, or a dedicated convener on board are less able to articulate a cohesive plan for funding.

(BWP Note: While DLEG does not currently award funds for planning purposes, MiRSA staff is available to assist entities during the planning stages.)

BWP Recommendation: Ability to apply for smaller planning grants, technical assistance from MiRSA staff during the planning stages, a continuous grant cycle, or an extended response time are options to help ease this concern.

Funding for Re-structuring

MiRSA Comments: Through the strategic planning and data gathering, some MiRSAs identify a benefit to re-structuring. That re-structuring may take the form of revising the geographic region, improving operations by working within a larger or smaller region. MiRSAs starting as Statewide or regions covering many counties have encountered communication, implementation, and management difficulties. Supportive data may suggest a better response to industry by segmenting by product, supply chain, process, or other criteria.

BWP Recommendation: Allowing programmatic flexibility within the MiRSA initiative could address these industry identified sector strategies that may reveal the need for new funding.

Sustainability

MiRSA Comments: Sustainability is not only an issue of financial resources, but also of relationship resources. Relationship resources will be addressed under the heading **Engaging Employers and Community Partners**. MiRSAs seem to be actively considering the issue of sustainability earlier in the development stages, which speaks clearly to ownership and commitment to goal achievement by the employers.

From a funding perspective, however, just as government, community partners, and foundations' coffers are experiencing more limitations, so employers are required to be increasingly aware of return on investment. Finding the cash to support MiRSA activities is a significant encumbrance to MiRSA longevity.

(BWP Note: The MiRSA website is continuously updated. MiRSA successes are regularly featured in the MiRSA Newsletter.)

BWP Recommendation: Sharing successful solutions within the MiRSA community could create cost saving efficiencies. The MiRSA website may provide the vehicle for this as well as sharing other types of successes. MiRSA staff awareness of the status of assigned MiRSAs may open opportunity's door to a rapid response- type approach for technical assistance. Active asset mapping could reveal untapped resources.

Engaging Employer and Community Partners

MiRSA Comments: Some MiRSAs mentioned difficulty in engaging larger and more influential employers within the industry. Also mentioned was the advantage of collaborating with suppliers and customers of the specific industry. It is evident these partnerships could have lasting systemic changes effecting workforce issues. This underscores the positives that some MiRSAs experienced from community-wide communication of their successes. MiRSAs with a strategic plan leading to clear implementation steps tends to attract partnerships. Engaged employers and partners have the best avenue to their peers. MiRSAs established with committed employers at the outset have less concern with this issue.

BWP Recommendation: Using asset mapping techniques early in MiRSA development could foster stronger partnerships. Sharing strategies of successful MiRSAs would also be useful in this situation.

Duplications by MiRSAs of the Same Industry but Different Regions

MiRSA Comments: More frequently, MiRSAs are recognizing the benefit of linking with MiRSAs of similar and dissimilar industries. These collaborations could maximize funding by eliminating the need to re-invent the wheel. Many times several MiRSAs identify similar implementation projects for their goals. Often occupational CDs and website creation are chosen as responses to industry issues in several different regions.

BWP Recommendation: State produced material like CDs and occupational brochures would save duplicated expenses. Webinars, regional forums, and learning institutes provide an opportunity for MiRSAs to network and share ideas and practices.

Other Issues

(MiRSA Comments)

- Conveners participating in several MiRSAs are experiencing a bit of overload.
- Some regions struggle with too few workers resulting in raiding by employers
- Previously established industry groups tend not to identify themselves as MiRSAs
- Some MiRSAs wrestle with individual agendas impeding group goal achievement

Conclusions:

Patterns identified during the initial site visits remain pertinent. Such that, several distinct phases of development are apparent. MiRSAs all fall somewhere within these phases. Successful MiRSAs share similar traits. Among these traits are a galvanizing issue, an employer champion, and depth of employer involvement, added value by the convener, staff dedication to the project, flexible structure, and an overall understanding of the concept by all involved, and strong strategic planning. There are also pitfalls to watch out for including; lack of a real benefit to employers, trying to fit projects into the MiRSA model, broadly defined issues, the lack of a dedicated staff, multiple conveners, the lack of clear leadership and weak strategic planning.

It seems incumbent upon the MiRSA staff to offer technical assistance early on during a MiRSA's development. Facilitating goal development, strategic planning, logic modeling and asset mapping to start with the most effective partners are some suggestions. MiRSA experiencing successes will generate employer and community interest and support.